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STAT

5 HOSTAGE WHO WAS CIA MAN REPORTEDLY TORTURED IN IRAN
BY STEVE HAGEY

William Buckley, the CIA's Beirut station chief who was kidnapped in 1984 and said to have died after prolonged torture, reportedly was secretly spirited through Syria by Iranian gunmen and delivered to Iran for interrogation.

The Washington Post said Tuesday that the White House has indirectly confirmed Buckley's death. The Post quoted U.S. sources as saying the CIA spent a "small fortune" trying to find Buckley, described as the agency's senior terrorism expert and Beirut station chief.

A London-based Arab newsletter said Buckley was flown by private jet from Damascus airport in Syria to Tehran less than a week after pro-Iranian Shiite Moslem gunmen abducted him in Beirut on March 16, 1984.

The newsletter, Al Taqrir, said Syrian President Hafez Assad apparently learned of Buckley's secret transit through Damascus only after his arrival in Tehran, and called Iranian President Ali Khamenei to ask whether Iran had Buckley.

Khamenei reportedly said Iran indeed had "a senior CIA man" in custody near the holy city of Qom, but that the man identified himself by the surname of "McCloskey."

U.S. and Middle East sources with close connections to the case of nine Americans kidnapped in Moslem west Beirut since 1984 say the man identified as McCloskey almost certainly was Buckley -- and that he was subjected to prolonged torture in Iran to force him to divulge CIA secrets.

Al Taqrir's report on Buckley, published in April 1985, could not be verified independently.

But sources familiar with the Shiite Moslem newsletter said they do not question the accuracy of its Buckley report, which Al Taqrir editor Ali Ballout said was attributed to the newsletter's "strong Iranian contacts" in Tehran.

Islamic Jihad, the pro-Iranian group that claimed responsibility for kidnapping Buckley and other Americans in Beirut, claimed it "executed" Buckley on Oct. 14, 1985, in retaliation for an Israeli attack on Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters in Tunisia a week earlier. It released an out-of-focus photograph of what it claimed was Buckley's body, but his body has never been found.

Sources close to the hostage crisis say Buckley, who was 56 when he was kidnapped, is believed to have died in May or June 1985 of pneumonia and other complications brought on by torture and a lack of medical attention.

If they are correct about the time of Buckley's death, it would mean he died at about the time the United States began secretly shipping arms to Iran as part of President Reagan's initiative to improve relations with Tehran and free the hostages. X

The sources say Buckley apparently broke under torture and spilled CIA secrets to the Iranians, then was delivered back to his Lebanese kidnappers, who extracted a written confession from him. Islamic Jihad, in a statement released in Beirut earlier this month, said it would release Buckley's "confessions" but has not yet done so.

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U.S. government sources told the Washington Post that Buckley was the only hostage with connections to the CIA or other intelligence agencies. Five kidnapped Americans are still missing in Lebanon -- two of them believed held by Islamic Jihad.

Buckley, a tall, distinguished-looking man from Medford, Mass., left his apartment on March 16, 1984, for the short walk to the U.S. Embassy in west Beirut. But he was ambushed by gunmen who bundled him into a car and sped south along the coastal highway toward Beirut airport.

Buckley was described in official U.S. statements as an Embassy "political officer."

At the time of his kidnapping, Buckley had been in Beirut only a few months. Western correspondents in Lebanon widely assumed he was the CIA's station chief, assigned to rebuild the CIA's collapsed intelligence-gathering network.

Seven senior CIA agents, including a man identified as Robert Ames, the agency's chief Middle East analyst, were reported killed on April 17, 1983, in a suicide truck-bomb blast that wrecked the U.S. Embassy compound in west Beirut.

Sources in Lebanon have said that immediately after Buckley was kidnapped, he was driven over the Shouf mountain range and into the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley, where he was handed over to Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the ancient town of Baalbeck.

From there, according to Al Taqrir, he was stuffed into the trunk of a car and driven across the Syrian-Lebanese border to Damascus airport. It said Buckley was then transferred to the small private jet of Rafik Mohsen-Dost -- Iran's Cabinet minister in charge of the Pasdaran, or Revolutionary Guards -- and flown to Tehran.

It was not known how long Buckley was held in Iran, but one source said pictures were taken of him in Iran and secretly delivered to U.S. officials.